

MEMORANDUM

NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL

INFORMATIONSECRET/SENSITIVE

April 20, 1973

MEMORANDUM FOR: MR. KISSINGER

FROM: RICHARD T. KENNEDY
JOHN H. HOLDRIDGE

SUBJECT: MORI/CDF
C05138348 The Status of Military Forces in Laos

CIA has reviewed the current status of Communist and friendly military forces in Laos (Tab A). The paper concludes that:

- The RLG would probably be unable to cope with major sustained Communist military activity in either Northern or Southern Laos in the near future without massive outside assistance.
- Over the last 18 months the Communists have developed clear fire power advantage, which in the past has been offset by U.S. airpower.
- Both sides are now in strong logistical positions, but if heavy fighting resumes, the RLG will have problems getting supplies to the front without our support for air delivery.
- Recent fighting has demonstrated the Communists hold the upper hand--and almost certainly intend to retain permanent control--in areas of Communist tactical interest in Laos: The PDF, from where they are trying to open Route 4 to the South; Muang Phalane in Central Savannakhet Province; the Bolovens Plateau in the lower third of the Panhandle; and Laotian Panhandle where there is the large NVA rear services organization.

A comparison of manpower, firepower, airpower, and logistical balances of both sides indicates:

Manpower: The overall manpower balance favors the Communists in numbers and quality of troops; however, the RLG has somewhat more combat ground troops.

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-- There are in all Laos an estimated 117,000 enemy troops, of which about 39,000 are NVA who have borne the brunt of the fighting; 19,000 Pathet Lao who for the most part hold ground taken by the NVA; and "Dissident Neutralists" (DN), having little military usefulness but used so the Communists can claim "true neutral" support. In both North and South Laos, NVA strength has been augmented in the last year.

-- Friendly forces number 95,000 and consist of FAR/FAN (50,000), guerrilla forces (26,000), RLAFF (2,000),

25X1

-- Friendly forces have never been a match for combined NVA/PL forces. Inferior firepower, poor leadership, low pay, and inadequate training are mostly responsible for FAR/FAN's poor showing. The Meo effectiveness has declined from heavy fighting and losses.

25X1

Firepower: The Communist firepower is greatly superior (in terms of numbers of heavy pieces, range and rate of fire) to that of friendly forces, but has traditionally been offset by U. S./RAF airpower.

-- In North Laos--mostly in MR II--the enemy possesses 30-40 tanks; at least 75 heavy field weapons including 85 mm and 130 mm guns, 105 mm and 122 mm howitzers, 122 mm rocket launchers, 120 mm mortars; also an estimated 150 anti-aircraft guns of 57 mm, 85 mm, and 100 mm calibre.

-- In Southern Laos--MR III and IV--the enemy has a combined total of 20-25 tanks; 40-50 heavy weapons; 8 AAA regiments of 600 guns; and a large number of SA-7 missiles in the Panhandle.

-- The FAR have fifty-five 105 mm and thirty 155 mm howitzers throughout Laos, which are inferior (range, accuracy, and rate of fire) to Communist long-range artillery.

Air: Allied air power has played a key role in Laos and if heavy fighting is resumed, the RLAFF aircraft are no match for enemy anti-aircraft capability without U. S. air support.

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- Traditionally, the U.S. has flown about two-thirds of all sorties-- mostly in Southern Laos against logistical targets along the Trail but also tactical missions in support of friendly troops.
- The RLAFF can fly about 4,000-5,000 attack sorties per month with its 168 assorted aircraft. Except for 10 AC-47 gunships, seventy-two T-28 aircraft are the only combat aircraft possessed by the RLAFF.
- NVN has never flown strikes in support of PL/NVA ground forces, but has the capability (8 IL-28 bombers and about 200 MIGs) to do so, especially if unchallenged by U.S. aircraft.

Logistics: At present neither side is short of supplies, but the RLG may have difficulty in moving supplies to the fighting units if heavy fighting resumes.

- The Communists have large stores of all types inside Laos and adequate reserves in NVN.
- Logistical position in Southern Laos--with its redundant road network--is as potentially strong as anywhere in Indochina. Supplies come from both North Vietnam and Cambodia (food-stuffs, largely rice). Stockpiles in Southern Laos and in the North Vietnamese Panhandle can probably sustain the estimated 5 to 10 tons of present daily military needs.
- Supplies from North Vietnam must reach the PDJ, Samneua, and Luang Prabang regions via three distinct corridors, but each has proved capable of meeting yearly requirements.
- There are sufficient ammunition and weapons in Laos to maintain the RLG for an indefinite period under current ceasefire conditions--
[redacted] for about a month^{25X1}
if heavy military activity resumes. Planning has begun to ensure availability of supplies and equipment during FY 1974. The problem will be in moving supplies forward without U.S. air support.

Comment: This is a pessimistic report, but is a fair and balanced one. Friendly forces--without U.S. air support--will not be able to match the better led and equipped Communist forces should serious fighting resume. In a continued ceasefire situation, the forces are roughly equal and will probably balance each other.

Attachment
Tab A

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No Foreign Dissem
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Intelligence Memorandum

The Current Status of Military Forces in Laos

Handle via Comint Channels

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